

Editorial

Trident – Nuclear Proliferation the British Way



Back in 1984, at a time when the British Labour Party policy favoured European Nuclear Disarmament, Gordon Brown declared that the Trident programme was ‘unacceptably expensive, economically wasteful and militarily unsound’. In those far off days the Labour Party favoured the simultaneous dissolution of the North Atlantic Treaty and the Warsaw Pact.

Gingerly feeling its way, the Kinnock leadership gradually accomplished the retreat from unilateralism, at the very time that true multilateralism had become a possibility. The Warsaw Treaty demobilised itself and went home. Its East European members severed their connections with the Soviet Union, which itself disintegrated, losing the Baltic States, parts of the Caucasus, and considerable influence in Central Asia. For Russia, these areas became part of the ‘near abroad’ which gave rise to the need for complex diplomacy and a considerable effort to influence other alignments. As Russia generated privatisation, oligarchs, and confusion on a grand scale, all the paradigms of deterrence were evacuated of whatever meaning they might once have held.

But in Britain, the Trident programme went on and on. Britain’s only system of nuclear armaments had been furnished by the United States, which provided the ballistic missiles direct, and also the blueprints of the submarines themselves as well as of the warheads, together with a not inconsiderable volume of technical

assistance in their construction. The missiles themselves are purebred red-blooded American armaments in every detail. Fifty-eight of them are leased on rotation by the British Government and deployed on four Vanguard submarines. They apparently also figure in the calculations of the Americans themselves about their overall deployment. Various failsafe mechanisms prevent stray missiles from launching themselves against anywhere in the world where the Americans do not wish them to go.

Of course, the main failsafe device is an embarrassingly subordinate and totally compliant British Government. This has long since lost any pretensions to independence and sees its defence policy as necessarily anchored in every detail to the needs of Washington.

The United States entered the new millennium with a rigid commitment to ‘full spectrum dominance’ in all military matters. Top dog: that was where the U.S. of A. was at. This managed to shrink other commitments almost to the point of invisibility. True, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty survived, but since the world’s megapower was determined to interpret this entirely selectively, it was unlikely to create problems. It would be useful in restricting the nuclear options of rogue or dubious States, but it could be instantly set aside in the case of putative allies. It never caused the slightest problems for Israel, perhaps the most serious proliferator in the most dangerous zone of the world, and it created only momentary difficulties for India and Pakistan.

But over time America’s wars have sapped American hegemony. Timid signs of life have even been observed in the United Nations. It is no longer axiomatic that world diplomacy must follow the script written in the State Department.

What, in this context, happens to the doctrine of deterrence? This doctrine was clearly much cited in relations between East and West, in the days before the implosion of the Soviet Union. Did it ever apply in other regions, such as the Middle East? It is difficult to disentangle appearances from realities in this region. The Bush/Blair alliance strayed into the battlefield in order to suppress weapons of mass destruction that did not exist in Iraq. That made the task of suppression all the easier.

The same intelligence services which got things so dramatically wrong in that country have intermittently played up the dangers of nuclear weapons in Iran. But these too, it appears, are fictitious. According to most conventional doctrines of deterrence, the Iranians need nuclear weapons in order to inhibit possible attacks by Israel, which has already demonstrated not only its willingness, but also its competence, to assume the role of nuclear policeman by attacking and destroying the Osirak reactor in Iraq in 1981.

If Israel’s responses were confined to belligerent rhetoric, it might be pardonable to dismiss the Israeli threat to neighbouring States. But there is a rather large record of painful military adventures which breeds fierce agnosticism on this score.

The Iranians are also hemmed about by other nuclear neighbours in India and Pakistan. In Western folklore India is a ‘good’ nation which cannot nourish militaristic expectations. That is as may be. But not many people will stand up to

proclaim similarly benign interpretations of Pakistani policy, and there may indeed be doubt about whether the proprietors of the Pakistani deterrent will remain securely in place for very long. Senator Obama has let it be known that if the Pakistani bomb falls into the wrong hands, he would favour military action to 'recover control'. Were there any truth at all in the deterrence theory, the bomb in Pakistan would surely constitute a big enough threat, and a large enough uncertainty, to justify the speediest possible counter-deployment. But instead, and mercifully for all of us, the official Iranian reaction is to renounce any intentions of pursuing nuclear armaments. Not only does Iran repudiate the bomb, but her supreme leader pronounced a fatwa against it.

There is only one rational antidote to all those free range bombs, in the hands of all those temperamental and unstable leaders: and it is indeed the renunciation of nuclear weapons and the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the entire Middle Eastern region. Difficult though this may be to achieve, its advantage over the alternative of frenzied preparation for nuclear mayhem all around the zone, is perfectly obvious to all but the proprietors of full spectrum dominance and military orthodoxy.

All of this argues that perhaps the most useful weapon in the UN armoury might be the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the doctrine of nuclear-free zones. But the British Government, whose international doctrine is thick with pieties about the United Nations, is totally indifferent to this key institution.

We already drew attention to this (*Spokesman No. 92*), in John Ainslie's forensic discussion of the nuclear dependency of Britain on the United States, and the implications of the decision to renew the Trident programme. Significant parts of the British military are deeply concerned about this decision, because it would pre-empt vast expenditures which would be likely to wipe out, for purely ideological reasons, spending on vital military equipment which they lack in their present wars. Officially, the nuclear weapons programme is supposed to cost between two and three per cent of the Defence Budget, or between seven hundred million pounds and one billion pounds every year. But the decision to renew the British deterrent entails enhancements to the specification of Trident which would undoubtedly constitute a breach of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the commissioning of new submarines which can carry them. So costly will this equipment prove that it has already put in jeopardy the programme of building the necessary new aircraft carriers to carry British forces into new wars for the greater glory of the American Empire. Perhaps we can manage without the aircraft carriers: but why on earth can we not also manage without the renewed deterrent?

Of course, renewed diplomatic goads and provocations might be souring relations with Russia to the point where various kinds of official unpleasantness are thinkable. There are days when it seems likely that the oligarchs have bought the Foreign Office as if it were a common or garden football club. But an all out nuclear war ...? The need to be able to destroy what is left of Russia, after they have wiped out the British mainland? Where has prudence gone in these calculations?

Now the *Sunday Herald* has produced evidence which shows that all the planning presumptions upon which British weapons' designers have been working are in meltdown, because the American designers appear to have unilaterally set aside the formal exchange of letters between President Bush and Prime Minister Blair on the modalities of missile renewal. In December 2006, Prime Minister Blair wrote formally to President Bush:

'The United Kingdom wishes to ensure that any successor to the D5 system is compatible with, or is capable of being made compatible with, the launch system for the D5 missile, which we will in the meantime be installing in our new submarines ...'

Bush responded by inviting Britain to take part in the D5 replacement programme, or to discuss the extension of the planned life of the missiles.

'In this respect any successor to the D5 system should be compatible with, or be capable of being made compatible with, the launch system for the D5 missiles.'

But the *Sunday Herald* (22nd December 2007) presents evidence that American designers have asked for tenders for a test-bed for future underwater launched nuclear missiles, which implies the breakdown of the formal exchanges between Bush and Blair. The tenders specify a missile diameter of up to one hundred and twenty inches, while the diameter of Trident's outgoing D5 missile tubes is eighty-seven inches. The intention in preparing the new submarines was to begin by arming them with existing Trident missiles, only later replacing them with the new missiles currently being designed by the United States. The projected new American test-bed must not only be able to support missiles which are much larger than the present Trident ones, but also much heavier. The new missiles will be up to 200,000lbs, as opposed to the present missiles which weigh 130,000lbs.

The British military planners envisage maintaining the new submarines until at least 2055. But how the new submarines can be designed to cope with a missile whose dimensions remain fluid will be, as Ainslie was reported as saying in the *Herald*, 'a nightmare'.

Perhaps a bigger nightmare is the destruction of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which all these new military decisions are calculated to accomplish. Was the NPT founded on illusions? Well, Gordon Brown is playing no small part in dissolving those illusions. What will we then have left but the continuous proliferation that we can already see in development?

Never was there a greater need for a rebirth of the peace movement, and a new campaign for nuclear disarmament.

Ken Coates